

Harpsichord

Designer Michele Todini Italian

Basilio Onofri Italian

Jacob Reiff Austrian, active Rome

ca. 1670

This harpsichord and its accompanying figures were part of Michele Todini's Galleria Armonica, a private museum featuring his complex musical mechanisms, clocks, and instruments. It was the centerpiece of La Macchina di Polifemo e Galatea, an installation that united music, visual art, and

centerpiece of La macchina di Polifemo e Galatea, an installation that united music, visual art, and dramatic narrative. Canvasses by Gaspard Dughet representing sea and air completed the scene. The Galleria was a popular stop on the European Grand Tour during the 1670s.

The frieze on the harpsichord's case depicts the Triumph of Galatea, and the two figures represent the narrative of the cyclops Polyphemus's unrequited love for the nymph Galatea. A small mechanical bagpipe that imitated the sound of his sculpted bagpipe would have been concealed in a "mountain," no longer present, and played from the harpsichord on a second keyboard. This enabled a narrator to present the story of Polyphemus and Galatea with musical accompaniment. Todini's ingenuity and multifaceted artistic expression sprang from the same creative climate that gave birth to opera.

Polyphemus:

Seated on a rock at the edge of the Ionian Sea, Polyphemus plays a bagpipe to charm Galatea. The instrument is similar to the sordellina doppia invented by Todini. The cyclops's kindly and refined expression suggests that Todini was referencing Polyphemus as portrayed by Theocritus in his Idylls, rather than the violent, enraged monster of Ovid's Metamorphoses. This interpretation is reinforced by the gentle, winsome sound of the sordellina that Todini chose to represent Polyphemus. Although the eye in the center of his forehead gazes outward, his normal eyes are closed, reflecting the notion that love is blind.

Galatea:

Galatea is depicted here as the young, idealized girl who Polyphemus encounters in his dreams. Her arms are posed in a Baroque theatrical gesture typically used to express innocence and helplessness. She rejects the love expressed by Polyphemus through his warm, lyrical bagpipe playing, and is represented musically by the cold, austere timbre of the harpsichord.

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Artwork Details

Title: Harpsichord

Designer: Michele Todini (Italian, Saluzzo, Piedmont, bapt. 1616–1690, Rome) , designer

Artist: Basilio Onofri (Italian, Rome active second half 17th century) , gilt work

Artist: Jacob Reiff (Austrian, Freiburg 1627–1700, active Rome 1650–1680) , carving

Date: ca. 1670

Geography: Rome, Italy

Culture: Italian (Roman)

Medium: Wood, gilt, ebony, ivory, parchment

Dimensions: Harpsichord: 14 3/4 in. × 9 ft. 10 in. × 38 in. (37.5 × 299.7 × 96.5 cm)
Polyphemus: 50 × 60 × 52 in. (127 × 152.4 × 132.1 cm)
Galatea: 35 × 57 × 47 in. (88.9 × 144.8 × 119.4 cm)

Classification: Chordophone-Zither-plucked-harpsichord

Credit Line: The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889

Accession Number: 89.4.2929a–e

Learn more about this artwork



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Timeline of Art History



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Baroque Rome



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Musical Terms for the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries



ESSAY

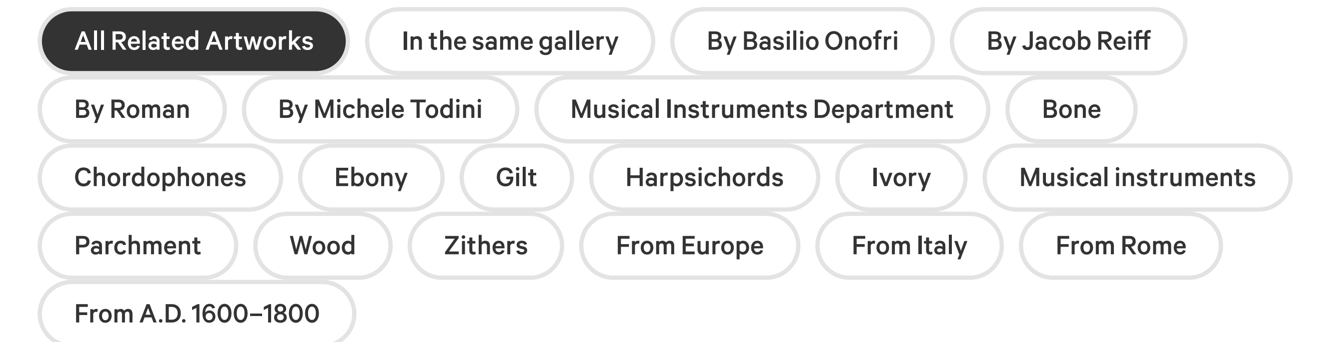
The Golden Harpsichord of Michele Todini (1616-1690)

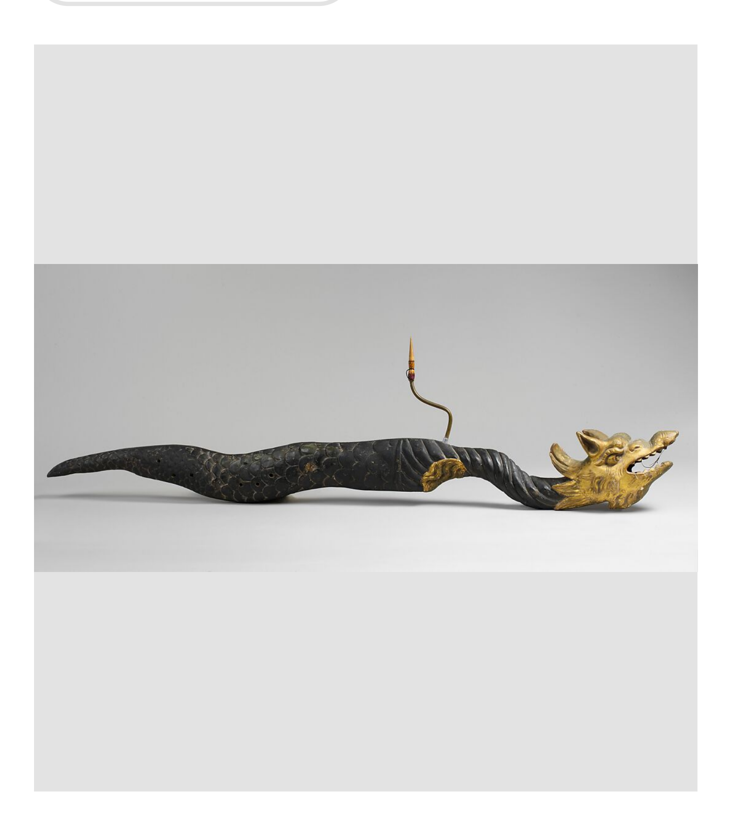


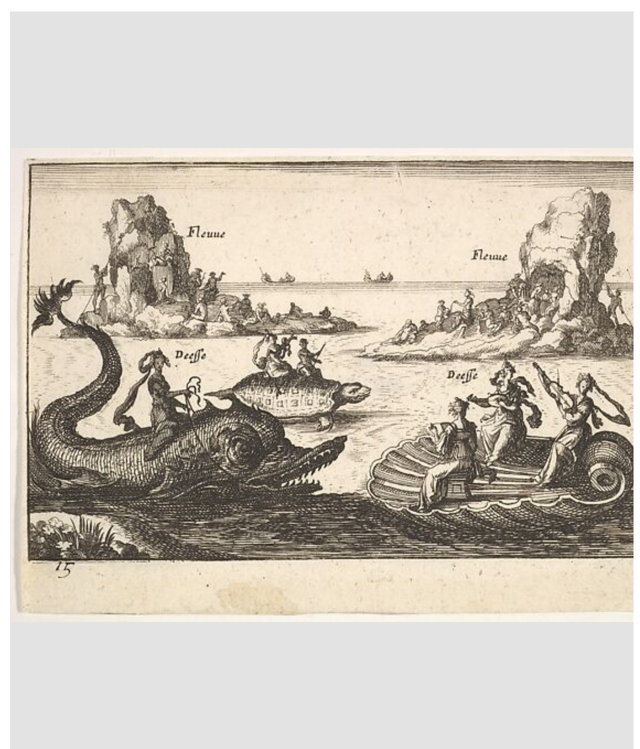
CHRONOLOGY

Rome and Southern Italy, 1600-1800 A.D.

Related Artworks







Sea Dragon

17th century

Plate 15: Rivers and goddesses, with floati islands guided by pole bearers, female figures seated on a dolphin and a tortoise, and three female musicians seated on a floating scallop shell , from the series 'The magnificent pageant on the river Arno in Florence for the marriage of the Grand Dul (Le Magnifique carousel fait sur le fleuve d l'Arne a Florence, pour le mariage du Granı Duc), for the wedding celebration of Cosin de' Medici in Florence, 1608

Anonymous

1664

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